

Goldfrap John Henry

The Boy Scouts Under Fire in Mexico



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CHAPTER I.

FOUR SCOUTS AFLOAT

"Luff a little, Merritt!"

"Luff it is, Rob. And let me tell you right now that if this head wind keeps on growing stronger, we're going to have it nip and tuck to get home before dark sets in. These November, days have a quick end, you know. Steady now, everybody; we'll have to come about."

"On the next leg, Merritt, run in as close to the shore as you can," continued the boy who was handling the sheet of the sailboat, and who seemed to be in command, though he had given up his place at the helm to a comrade.

"Just what I'll do, Skipper Rob. Here, Andy, and you, Tubby, swing over to the la'board in a hurry, now, and help hold her down. You're the best ballast we've got aboard, Tubby."

The stout boy who seemed so well named, for he was built on the order of a tub of butter, hastened to change his position as the boom of the sailboat swung over, and the little craft with a jump started on a new tack, this time heading for the mainland.

"Say, you want to make sure and clear that point over there!" he sang out as he sprawled along the upper port side of the craft like a great crab, owing to a sudden lurch of the boat.

"Going to do it as easy as to turn your hand over," replied the boy at the rudder; "but what makes you say that, Tubby?"

"Oh! I reckon now there might be some fellers got a duck blind on that point, which is said to be the best along the bay," replied the other. "Leastways I noticed a whole raft of stools dancing up and down on the waves the last time we ran in close to the shore."

"Good for you, Tubby," remarked the boy called Rob, who was clinging steadily to the sheet, with the strain mostly relieved by the fact that it passed through a hole in the stout cleat; "it's plain that you've got your eyes with you this trip, and don't mean to be caught napping. There are two fellows in a blind over on the point; I saw them watching us the last time we ran in; and they acted as though they were afraid we'd anchor and spoil all their evening shoot when the ducks are moving again. But never fear, we're going to clear the point by a wide margin this time."

"It was a good thing school let out so early to-day, boys," remarked the lad who up to now had not spoken, and who seemed to answer to the name of Andy; "and that Rob invited the rest of us to go with him after that half bushel of big oysters his folks want for dinner to-morrow."

"What makes you talk that way, Andy?" asked Rob, wondering if the other had also been keeping his eyes about him and noticing things. "This is Friday afternoon, and if we hadn't gone to-day what do you think would hinder our taking a little spin up the bay in the morning?"

"Oh! you never can count on the wind around Hampton," replied the other; "chances are, when you want it most of all, it gives you the go-by. And besides, Rob, I've been watching that sky up there. Look how it's mottled, will you? I've always heard that that sort of clouds meant a storm."

Rob laughed as though rather pleased.

"Well, that's just one good reason why I hurried off this afternoon instead of waiting for morning," he observed; "but then, I had a better warning than the looks of the sky to give me notice. You see, I chanced to drop around by the post office on the way to school after lunch, and stepped in to read what the weather report man in Washington had sent along. There's a whopper of a storm

coming up the coast from the West Indies, and headed right this way; a sort of left-over hurricane, it says; and storm warnings are ordered up from Jacksonville to Nantucket!"

"Whee!" exclaimed Tubby, "that means winter will like as not set in right after that storm passes along, and we'll get no more sails on the bay. I hate winter for all the fun with skates and bobsleds. Don't I wish now my Uncle Mark would make up his mind to send me down there to a warm country like Mexico to look after his tangled business affairs? Honest Injun, fellers, he did say he might think of something like that if he didn't get some better soon. He's terribly bothered for fear he's going to lose all his cattle and everything, with those rebels and regulars cavorting all over that section. Hello! that was a gun spoke then; and there goes another! Yes, and he got one duck, anyhow, because I saw it drop like a stone. And we're already past the point, boys!"

While the little sailboat is beating up against a head wind and sea, bent on making Hampton, several miles away along the Long Island shore of the bay, it might be a good time for us to renew acquaintance with the four lads on board, and glance back over their past career.

All of them were dressed in the well known khaki suits that, the world over, have become a recognized sign manual of Boy Scouts. These lads belonged to Hampton Troop, and were instrumental in starting the organization in the shore town. For some time it had consisted of but a single patrol, the Eagles; but as success followed their efforts, and more boys became enthused and enlisted, other patrols known as the Owl, the Black Fox, and the Badger were formed; so that at the time we meet Rob and his chums in the sailboat there was a very strong troop in Hampton, with even a rival organization under way.

Rob Blake was the leader of the Eagle Patrol, and Merritt Crawford held the post of second in command, or corporal; while Andy Bowles filled the position of bugler. Tubby as yet had not aspired to fill anything, unless it was his stomach; and his chums were forever joking him with regard to his fondness for eating.

In the first volume of this series, "The Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol," the reader was made acquainted with Rob and his friends, and followed their exciting fortunes after they had formed the patrol. Rob was the son of the president of the local bank, while Merritt's father had been known as the finest blacksmith and wheelwright in that section of Long Island; Andy's folks ran the big livery stable; and Tubby's only parent, his mother, was said to be fairly well off in property and stocks.

A happy chance allowed some of the scouts to visit the far Southwest, and in the second story many of the strange adventures that befell them there were narrated. Though "The Boy Scouts on the Range" teems with thrilling happenings, those who read it from cover to cover will admit that the Eagles bore themselves manfully under all conditions, and always acted according to scout law.

Later on some of the boys became interested in the subject of aviation; and about this time chance allowed them to be of considerable assistance to certain parties in the employ of the Government, who were conducting experiments not far from their home town; all of which was told in the pages of "The Boy Scouts and the Army Airship."

A fourth volume was given up to what occurred while the Eagles were encamped in the wilderness; where circumstances arose that called for all their knowledge of woodcraft and scout lore; but those who have read "The Boy Scouts' Mountain Camp" will surely unite in saying that Rob and his chums met the situation as became true scouts, and came out of the affair with great credit.

In the succeeding story, "The Boy Scouts for Uncle Sam," the boys found themselves involved in a succession of thrilling events. An opportunity arose whereby their services were in demand in order to save the design of a wonderful submarine craft, intended for the use of the United States Government, from being stolen by the clever agents of a foreign power. It was largely through the efforts of the scout patrol that this treacherous design was finally foiled.

A sixth volume, just preceding the present story, "The Boy Scouts at the Panama Canal," contained the history of events that befell Rob and his particular chums at a time when they were given a splendid chance to visit the great ditch which Uncle Sam was then digging down on the Isthmus.

Once again they managed to bring into play the resourcefulness which, as members of the Eagle Patrol, had been developed in them; and it was principally through the agency of scoutcraft that the evil designs which certain envious nations had upon the locks of the canal were blocked.

Which short but necessary explanation once more brings us to the four chums as they tacked back and forth while trying to make the home port before dusk set in. Now that they were headed toward the mainland they made rapid progress, for the wind was certainly increasing in force right along. It came from a point that enabled them to make this the long leg, gaining quite a considerable distance. Once again they tacked, and the best they could expect to do was to hold their own in a beat toward the sandy outer shore of the bay, which helped to make the inlet all but landlocked.

"This is sure going some!" Tubby called out, as he began to get himself into readiness for another quick slide across when they should come about again; the spray was flying in their faces, more or less, and the waves that raced past seemed tipped with white.

"Look out for your heads when we swing around!" called Merritt. "That boom is heavy enough to sweep you overboard, I guess!"

"Excuse me from taking a bath right here and now!" exclaimed Tubby, who was not much of a swimmer at the best. "But see here, what does all this mean, fellers? Why, look at the water in the bottom of the boat, will you? Tell you what, she's gone and sprung a leak as sure as anything! Rob, you won't head out in the bay again, will you, with all this chance of our foundering? Gingersnaps! it keeps on getting worse and worse, I tell you! We'll sink inside of ten minutes!"

Rob, who owned the sailboat, took one look at the water that was already washing about in the bottom of the uptilted craft. He must have realized that something strange had happened to cause so staunch a boat to spring a leak, and also that the situation was serious; for no sooner had he taken in the suspicious way in which the water was rising in the cockpit, than he shouted:

"Keep her headed straight for the shore, Merritt! We've got to beach her one way or another. Tubby, help me with the halliards so we can drop the sail. You pull up the centerboard, Andy! Hurry now, everybody!"

There was a scene of activity on board the little pleasure craft just then, with three of those lively scouts springing about their duty. And as the sail came rattling down on top of the cabin, with Tubby sprawled under its folds, and as Andy fastened the heavy centerboard which he had drawn full height in the well, the boat ran up on the sandy beach of a little cove that had chanced to lie directly ahead at the time the skipper gave his hurried orders!

CHAPTER II. THE STRANGE LEAK

"Gee whiz! but this is a bad job!" Merritt remarked, after the four of them had clambered over the bow of the stranded sailboat. "Here we are as much as three miles away from home, with night coming on and not much chance of getting the boat fixed so we can go on again in her."

"She never played you such a mean trick before, did she, Rob?" asked Andy, who had managed to get his feet wet in making a jump for the sandy beach, but, boylike, seemed to care very little about such a small thing.

"No, and I'm wondering right now what could have happened to make her spring a big leak like that all of a sudden," replied the other.

As though impelled by curiosity, Rob once more climbed aboard the boat and started to look around. One of the first things he did was to fling ashore a sack that seemed to be pretty heavy, — as might be expected, since it contained the half bushel of extra large oysters for which he had been sent to the beds near the ocean side of the bay, a long way from Hampton town.

"I'm bound to get that sack home with me if I have to carry it on my back," he called out; at which the other boys, of course, declared that they would willingly "spell" him, though the prospect could not have seemed very inviting.

"But see here, will it be safe to leave the boat in this little cove all night with a big storm heading along up the coast?" Merritt asked next.

"Safe or not," came from the one aboard the stranded boat, "there's nothing else we can do, is there? Besides, if that storm holds off till noon, I'll be up here on my wheel the first thing tomorrow, bale her out, fix the leak, and work her back home by hook or crook. Hello! what in the wide world does this mean, now?"

"Found the place where the water came in, have you, Rob?" called Tubby, who was hefting the sack of bivalves, and perhaps secretly wondering whether it might not make their labor of transporting the same to the Blake house easier if they proceeded to discard a few of the shells and partake of the juicy contents.

"Why, it's a *round* hole, I tell you!" shouted Rob.

"What's that you're giving us?" demanded Andy. "I've seen some queer things happen to boats, but that's the first time I ever knew one to spring a leak with a round hole. Are you joshing us, Rob?"

"I tell you it's as round as a quarter, and about as big into the bargain!" continued the other vigorously. "And what's more, this boat never sprung a leak!"

"Oh! say, p'raps now a sword fish rammed his beak through her planks!" ejaculated Tubby, who could always be depended on to think up the most extraordinary explanation possible when anything out of the ordinary happened.

All of the other scouts had now crawled back on the boat, their curiosity having been fully aroused by the strange announcement made by Rob. Merritt even insisted on feeling down in the water, and thrusting his forefinger through the said hole.

"Jiggered if what Rob says isn't so, boys," he called out; "because I've got my finger all the way through the hole right now! Why, it's as smooth as if it had been made with an inch bit. Take my word for it, that's the truth!"

"And I've got a good notion that was what did make it!" Rob observed solemnly; at which Tubby gasped, opening his mouth in the queer way he had of doing when greatly astonished.

"You mean somebody went and bored a hole right through the planks of your boat, do you, Rob?" he asked excitedly. "But why didn't the water rush in before, when we've been more than a whole hour sailing?"

"Why, you silly," cried Andy, "of course it must have had a plug in the hole! It was probably fixed so that sooner or later it just had to be jarred loose, and the pressure of the water outside would push the same in. That was what happened when we made our last turn. And this same old plug must have been hidden under the false bottom, which none of us thought to pull up till she floated loose!"

"Here's the proof of it, fellows!" said Rob just then; and he held up something he had discovered floating on the surface of the water, that already partly filled the cockpit toward the stern of the stranded boat.

"It is a plug, as sure as you live!" ejaculated Merritt. "Let's look at it, Rob!"

One after another they examined the round piece of wood, which had undoubtedly been shaped just to fit the hole bored in the bottom plank.

"That was about the meanest trick I ever heard tell of!" grumbled Tubby, his round face redder than ever with indignation. "If ever I could find out who did it, I'd feel like showing him up to all Hampton, that's what. Here, what's this on the water, fellers? Looks to me like a curled chip, such as would come out when an auger or a brace and bit was used."

"Just what it is, Tubby," added Merritt; "which shows that this measly hole was bored since the last time Rob went sailing. Otherwise, he must have seen the plug when he took out the false flooring to clean the boat."

"It's a queer shaving, boys," continued Tubby, with his head bent low over the object he held in his hand. "See, here, where there's a break all the way along, and right in the middle, too! What would you make of that, Rob?"

"I might be away off in my guess," the other went on to say, after he, too, had closely examined the shaving; "but it seems to me as though that bit must have had a good-sized nick in each half of the biting edge, queer as that would be. As it kept on turning, it left this raised ridge, you see."

"Just what I had in my mind, Rob, give you my word for it," Tubby continued excitedly. "And I'm thinking right now that this ought to be a pretty good clew to prove who made that hole in your boat. All we've got to do is to find a bit with a nick in both tongues that fits this shaving; and the thing is as plain as the nose on Andy's face, here."

"Suppose you leave me out when you're making comparisons, Tubby; but then you're only saying that because you're envious; your own nose doesn't count for much, with such fat cheeks alongside!" Andy burst out.

But Rob considered that what Tubby had said was worth noticing, for he immediately started to congratulate him, – as a patrol leader always should do when one of his comrades has given positive evidences of waking up and noticing things.

"Tubby, that's a smart dodge of yours, let me tell you," he went on to say, as he turned on the fat scout; "and if you keep that chip so it won't break, and can find a bit that fits the marks to a dot, the chances are you'll know who played this dirty trick on me. And because you thought of it first I'm going to hand that job over to you, see? Here's the plug and the chip for you to keep. And some fine day I'll expect to have a report from you."

"Well, what's the next word, Rob?" asked Merritt, as they all made the flying leap ashore again. This time it was Tubby who made a miscalculation and landed in six inches of water. He hastily scrambled up on the beach to the accompaniment of rude laughter from Andy, who felt better now that there were a pair of them with wet feet; for misery always likes company.

"Oh! we'll make the cable fast to this stunted tree here, and leave the old boat to take her chances to-night," replied the other, as he started to carry his words into action. "Doubtless I'll find her safe in the morning, and be able to get her home if the storm holds off."

"You don't come up here without having me along, remember," warned Merritt; at which Rob stopped long enough in his labor of securing the end of the rope to the tree to give the other a nod and a smile; for they were chums in everything, and almost inseparable.

"And the rest of you just keep mum about this nasty little business, so that I c'n have the whole field to myself," Tubby warned them, as though feeling of considerable importance since the patrol leader had handed the mysterious case over into his charge. "I'm going to learn who bored that hole, or know the reason why, if I have to visit every workshop in Hampton by degrees, and find some excuse for examining every blessed bit there is. But right now I want to say I've got a hunch I c'n lay my finger on the guilty one, even if I dassent say so till I get the proof fixed on him good and hard. Then look out for explosions, that's all!"

Having fastened his boat as well as circumstances allowed, Rob picked up the sack containing the selected oysters, threw it over his shoulder, and announced himself ready for the three mile walk along the road that skirted the shore side of the bay.

The four scouts soon found themselves trudging along the highway which led from the direction of Montauk Point. It was in fair condition, as they well knew, having been over it many times on their wheels, or in vehicles of various types from a car to a hay wagon.

"If we had any sort of luck, now," remarked Merritt, after they had been walking for some little while, and he made ready to relieve Rob of his load, "we'd hear some sort of wagon coming up behind, and get a ride home."

"Don't I wish it would happen, though?" sighed Tubby, who on account of his burden of flesh always found it much harder than the other Eagles to hike over the country. He was so stubborn, however, that he would persist in anything he undertook until he fairly dropped in his tracks, rather than give up.

"Well," remarked Rob, chuckling, "some good fairy must have heard that wish, Tubby, because right now I can get the thud of horses' hoofs on the road back yonder. And there goes the crack of a whip."

"You're right, Rob," observed Andy quickly; "queer how you get on to all these little wrinkles before the rest of us. Seems like you must always 'be prepared,' like every true scout is expected to keep himself."

"Hope it's an empty wagon, and not a loaded hay rig," grunted Tubby.

"According to the way the sounds hit me," continued Rob, "it's a wagon, all right; and it rumbles like an empty one, too. But we shall soon know, for it is overtaking us right fast now."

"Let's halt here, and line up, two on each side of the road," suggested Merritt. "The darkness has gathered so it's hard to see any distance; but there around the bend back of us comes a white horse on the trot! Rob, you hit the nail right on the head, for sure enough it's drawing an empty wagon, with two men sitting on the seat and using the whip."

"Looks like they might be in a hurry," suggested Andy. "Watch that one turning around to take another look along the road behind. Get ready to give 'em a hail, Eagles. Rob, you do the talking while the rest of us let out our Eagle cry."

Two minutes later and the vehicle had arrived almost opposite where the scouts stood half screened by the bushes. At a signal from Rob the four stepped out upon the road. Rob started to call to the men in the wagon, meaning to ask them for permission to ride, while Merritt and Tubby and Andy gave a united "K-r-e-e-e," that sounded very weird as heard under such conditions.

What followed astonished the four boys very much indeed. The men, seeing so many uniformed figures blocking the road, as it seemed, gave vent to exclamations of abject alarm. Jumping from their seat, they started to run back along the way they had just come. Then suddenly turning to one side they plunged into the brush, where their hasty progress was marked by all sorts of sounds that would indicate that they were stumbling blindly through the thick undergrowth, tumbling over logs and rocks, evidently on the verge of being panic-stricken!

CHAPTER III.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE ROAD

The four boys stood there on the dusty road in the twilight of that windy November day, and for a full minute seemed unable to express the sense of bewilderment that had overwhelmed them all. Alongside was the white horse attached to the empty wagon; and from the docile manner in which the animal had come to a sudden halt and stood there, he was not at all averse to having a resting spell after having been whipped so steadily that he was in a sweat.

"Well, I'll be jiggered, if that don't beat the Dutch!" Merritt burst out, he being apparently the first to recover his breath.

"Why, they're gone!" ejaculated Tubby. "And say, they went and left their rig with us, don't you see? Well, I must say they are awfully polite. This is more'n we ever expected, isn't it, fellers?"

Rob was laughing, as though secretly amused at the hasty flight of the two men who had been in the wagon.

"Chances are, now, they took us for hoboos meaning to hold 'em up; and that's why they jumped for it!" Andy suggested.

"Well," remarked Rob, "I couldn't say that I'd blame them for thinking anything after hearing all that racket you three scouts made giving the Eagle cry. Most people would jump at the conclusion that a lot of lunatics had broken loose from that asylum down at Amityville. You should have let me say my little say without that heathen noise. It's all very well for a scout in the bush to let another know what patrol he belongs to when he sees another approaching; but ordinary people hardly understand what that racket means."

"But, Rob, do you believe they took us for desperate yeggmen wanting to hold 'em up on the road here, and rob 'em?" asked Andy.

"No, I don't," replied the patrol leader readily. "In the first place, even if it is getting dusk right now, it's still light enough for anybody with eyes to see that we don't happen to be a ragged lot like tramps are pretty much all of the time."

"Then why should they skoot like that, I want to know?" Tubby inquired.

"Like as not they saw our scout uniforms," suggested Merritt at a hazard.

"That's just what they did," Rob hastened to add with emphasis; "and from the shock the sight of the same gave the parties, I'm thinking they must have guessed we were soldiers who meant to arrest a couple of men driving a white nag!"

"Oh! I wonder now if that would explain the queer stunt?" Tubby ventured to say.

"Sounds pretty good to me, Rob," was what the corporal of the troop remarked as he stood there and stared at the spot where the pair of alarmed men had left the road and plunged into the thicket. "And maybe some of the rest of you noticed as I did that the taller one of the pair limped, as though he might have a bad leg or a sprained ankle."

"Yes, I noticed that, Merritt, and was waiting to see if any of the rest of you had used your eyes to advantage," Rob told him.

"I did, cross my heart if I didn't!" reported Tubby.

"And I would have seen the same only the rest of you happened to be in my way," the fourth scout struck in, not wanting to have it appear that he was the only fellow to be so dazed by what had happened that he had failed in his duty as a scout to observe every little detail.

"And I want all of you to take notice," continued the patrol leader, "that just where they left the road and disappeared from our sight, there happens to be growing a white birch tree that hangs out at an angle of twenty-five degrees. Birches are not so plentiful around here but what we could easily find that same one again in case we wanted to try and follow up the tracks of the men."

"To give 'em back their rig, you mean, Rob?" hinted Tubby.

"Either that or for some other reason," replied the other shortly.

"Well, I don't hear any scrambling now," remarked Andy. "Probably they are so far away the sounds don't carry."

"But how about that ride to town?" demanded Tubby anxiously. "Do we get cheated out of that just because a pair of sillies chose to get cold feet at sight of scout uniforms, and skedaddled like a dog with a tin can tied to his tail?"

"Yes, how about it, Rob?" continued Merritt. "Do we leave this horse and wagon on the road here, doing no good at all, while we trudge along over two miles of ground, carrying this heavy sack of shellfish? If you asked me now, I would say let's borrow the outfit, and give thanks!"

"Ditto here!" exclaimed Tubby eagerly.

"Count me in," said Andy, "and that makes it three affirmatives; how do you vote, Rob? Say 'yes,' and make it unanimous, won't you?"

The patrol leader laughed again at the appeal, and glanced around at the faces of his three chums.

"Well, it would be like looking a gift horse in the mouth to let this fine chance slip past us," he went on to say, much to the delight of his companions; for Tubby immediately threw up his campaign hat to signify his joy, while the others nodded their heads and looked pleased.

"Good for you, Rob," Merritt said, as he proceeded without more ado to pick up the sack of oysters, and, stepping over to the tail end of the wagon, toss them aboard. "So far as I can see, I don't believe we'll have any trouble about taking the rig, even if the men turn out to be honest, which I'm right sure they won't. We can say they abandoned it on the road, and we thought we ought to fetch it into town to turn it over to the police; which we mean to do, remember, fellows."

"Sure, we'll only be doing the right thing to deliver the outfit to the Chief," Tubby went on record as saying. "My Uncle Mark was telling me about something that happened to him as near like this as two peas; and it turned out that the men in the rig were a pair of desperate bank burglars, making off with the stuff they'd hooked from a town not far away. That was how he got his first thousand dollars, he says, that started him along the road to success, years and years ago. And Merritt, did you take a good look to see if there is any mysterious little package in that same wagon? Wouldn't it be a queer thing now if history took to repeating itself, and this time Uncle Mark's nephew was one of the bunch that recovered the stolen plunder? Anything doing, Merritt?"

"Well, you'll have to make up your mind to being disappointed this time, Tubby," observed the corporal. "This wagon hasn't a thing in it except a handful of hay, and I've pulled that around to make sure it didn't hide anything. But we didn't calculate to discover any jewelry or bank funds; the best we asked for was a chance to ride to Hampton; and we've got it. Pile in, fellows. This horse has come some way, and has been made to travel right lively, too. Why, he's reeking with sweat! Somebody must have been in a hurry!"

They lost no time in clambering into the wagon. Tubby, being the slowest to get up, found the seat fully occupied.

"Where do I come in?" he asked rather plaintively, after the fashion of the unfortunate one who was usually being left out.

"Plenty of room back there in the wagon, Tubby!" chuckled Rob.

"Use the sack of oysters for a seat if you want to!" added Andy.

"Can't you move over and make room for one more?" pleaded the fat scout.

"We might if it was for a Living Skeleton, but not for the Fat Boy of the Side Show," was Merritt's reply. And so Tubby was compelled to climb into the body of the wagon, and sit down as best he could on the hard bed.

"Please don't make the nag gallop, boys," he asked as a particular favor; "because if you do he'll swing the wagon around every-which-way, and there's no telling what would happen to me. I guess I've got feelings, if I do happen to measure a little more around the waist than anybody else present."

"A little!" jeered Andy. "You must mean as much as the whole three of us put together, don't you, Tubby?"

"Forget it," mumbled the other; for already the vehicle had begun to move. As Merritt whipped the tired horse, it gave a jump forward that caused Tubby to roll over on his back the first thing, and then clutch wildly at the sides of the wagon, as though in mortal terror lest he be tossed out and left there on the road to walk home.

"This is something like a treat, after tramping along for a whole mile, and with that heavy sack into the bargain," Rob declared, as they began to make fair progress in the direction of the home town.

"Talk to me about your good luck," ventured Andy, who sat on the other end of the seat from the driver, "it seems to me the Eagles are always having things happen to them that never would come to other fellows."

"But not all of the same are favors by a long sight, Andy," Merritt reminded him. "Don't forget how we had that boat spring a leak; and if the accident had occurred when we were out in the middle of the bay, chances are we'd have had to swim for the shore. The good luck came in its happening near land."

"Well, that's what I mean, of course," persisted the other. "If we do have to run up against a snag, why something always turns up to help us out. Look back at lots of things that have come our way, and you'll say I'm right. And you three fellows especially have had luck chase after you more than a few times."

"I guess that is about right," sang out Tubby from the rear; showing that although he might be having the time of his life holding on to the sides of the wagon as it clattered along the road, all the same he kept his ears wide open.

"Well," remarked Rob, with a laugh, "any lot of scouts who can have a rig like this handed to them without the asking, when they have several miles over a dusty road to tramp, ought not to complain. We're on what they call 'Easy Street' right now. And who knows but there may be a few dollars' reward offered for the recovery of a stolen outfit? It wouldn't surprise me very much; because the way those men scuttled at sight of our suits makes me believe they couldn't have been strictly honest. No decent party need fear the khaki uniform, whether of a soldier or a Boy Scout!"

"Look! what was it that flashed ahead there in the bushes?" suddenly exclaimed Andy. Half unconsciously, Merritt at the same time started to pull at the reins, so that the horse no longer galloped headlong as before, much to the relief of poor knocked-about Tubby.

The boy in the back of the wagon was just about to try and scramble to his knees in order to look beyond his mates on the seat, when, without the slightest warning, a very gruff voice full of authority called out:

"Pull in there and throw up your hands, every one of you, d'ye hear? You're all under arrest!"

Moving figures sprang out upon the white road, and the horse, finding his forward progress blocked, gladly came to a full stop. The occupants of the wagon sat there, hardly knowing what to make of this new happening.

One man caught the horse close to the bits, and two others hastened to advance to the wagon, as if to make sure that none of those who occupied the vehicle made a flying leap from the back and took to their heels.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN SCOUTCRAFT WAS IN DEMAND

"Looks like the rig, all right, Chief!" one of the men called out.

The tall man he addressed did not reply; for, truth to tell, at that particular minute he was staring very hard at the three scouts who sat there on the seat of the wagon. There was not a great deal of light, but evidently he had made a discovery that astounded him.

"Why, they're a lot of boys, after all!" exclaimed the man who had advanced to the other side of the wagon, holding something up that glittered like a revolver.

"Yes, and wearing scouts' uniforms at that!" added the tall man whom one of the others had called "Chief." As he pushed still closer to the wagon he went on to say, "I think I ought to know this lad here. Is it you, Rob Blake?"

"Just who it is, Chief," replied the other soberly; "and you can hardly blame us for having our breath taken away on being held up so suddenly at the point of the pistol and told that we were under arrest!"

"But the white horse deceived us, Rob," hastily answered the other, who was really the new head of the Hampton police force, a man who had made it his business to get acquainted with every boy in town, believing that he could nip lots of impending trouble in the bud by letting boys know that he was interested in all they did, and ready to prove himself their best friend. "You see, we've been 'phoned that a couple of desperate men who escaped from the jail over at Riverhead had stolen a wagon and a white horse and were heading this way. So we came out to lay for the rascals. Sorry to have bothered you, boys."

"Well, this may prove to be the very horse and wagon they told you about, Chief," Rob went on to say; while the other two officers now crowded up close to catch all that passed.

"Just what it might!" added Andy, wishing to let everybody know that he was in the affair, if he didn't happen to be holding either the lines or the whip.

"Please tell us, won't you, Chief, whether one of the men that broke jail limped like he had a bad leg or a sprained ankle?" Tubby broke out, before Rob could get in another word.

"What's that you're telling me, my lad?" exclaimed the officer eagerly. "Now, I didn't think it worth while to mention the fact to you, but the truth is the taller man of the two did have a bad fall when he broke out, and he must have injured himself in some way. Do you mean that you've set eyes on that precious pair of rogues?"

"It was this way," Rob started to say, meaning to make his explanations as brief as possible. "We had been up the bay to get half a bushel of select oysters from old Cap. Jenkins over at his beds; and on the way home we had the misfortune to spring a leak, so that we had to beach the sailboat and start along the road, as night was coming on, and we wanted to get back in time for supper."

"That's right, supper was the main thing we had in mind, Chief, believe me," Tubby volunteered just then; after which he again relapsed into silence, and allowed Rob to finish his story.

"Of course we wanted to get a ride if we could, Chief, because the sack was heavy," the patrol leader went on to say, "and, well, boys always like to ride better than they do to walk. Pretty soon we heard a horse and wagon coming after us, and one of the two men aboard was whipping the poor beast dreadfully. Well, we lined up, and as soon as they came along all of us stepped out to ask if we could have a lift as far as Hampton; when, would you believe me, the men jumped out of the wagon as if they'd seen a ghost, and went back along the road as fast as they could tear, soon breaking into the scrub, and disappearing."

"Leaving you the rig; is that it, Rob?" asked the officer, laughing as he spoke.

"Just what they did, sir," continued the patrol leader; "and you may be sure we couldn't even get our breath together to call out and thank them before they'd vanished. Well, we got to talking it over, and made up our minds the men must have stolen the rig, and were badly frightened by the sight of our scout uniforms, thinking we might be soldiers meaning to arrest them. And after we had waited a little while, thinking they might come back, why, we just made up our minds there wasn't any use looking a gift horse in the mouth; but that we'd take the rig to town so as to turn it over to you at Police Headquarters. And here it is at your service, Chief."

"But I hope you'll let us ride to town in it?" Tubby struck in.

"Well, you've all done me a great favor, boys," the tall official went on to say; "and if so be you feel that you must get along home, why, take the rig and leave it in front of my office. But if you could put us in the way of nabbing that pair of escaped rogues, you'd be doing a great thing. They're a bad crowd, and the longer they stay loose, the worse it is going to be for the community."

"We can help you some there, Chief!" Rob hastened to declare.

"I should say we could!" added Andy with emphasis.

"We happen to know just where they left the road and plunged into the brush; and perhaps we might even be of some assistance to you in following their trail, Chief; because, you understand, scouts are supposed to know more or less about such things. Woodcraft comes under the head of a scout's education. What d'ye say, fellows; shall we turn around right now and take these officers to the place where the leaning white birch hangs over the road?"

Every voice came in a decided affirmative. Even Tubby, who had been amusing himself while holding on to the sides of the wagon by figuring out just how long he must wait until he could hope to find himself seated at the supper table, heroically pushed aside all such temptations, and proved that he could rise to an occasion like a true scout.

"Then that's settled," said Rob, proud of his mates of the Eagle Patrol; "and if you will wait till we turn the horse around, Chief, you can have my seat here."

Merritt quickly backed the wagon into the side of the road, and faced the animal in the direction from which he had just come.

Meanwhile Rob and Andy had crawled over the rear of the seat and joined Tubby, who seemed pleased when he found that he was going to have company. The Chief and one of his men occupied the seat, along with the scout who was doing the driving; while the other officer contented himself with sitting so that his legs dangled over the tail board.

In this fashion, then, they started to retrace the ground the boys had so recently gone over. Of course the Chief had a dozen questions to ask in connection with the actions of the two men, as to what they said and what they did.

"The only words any of us heard them say were: 'Holy smoke, looky here, Con!'" Rob told him. "But they made up for it by doing some tall sprinting, lame man or not, that would have won them a prize at an athletic meet."

"Well, right there you've settled the thing and clinched it into the bargain," the tall police officer remarked with a satisfied chuckle; "because, don't you know, one of the rascals went by the name of Con Keating. And if the taller of the pair has a broken leg, why we ought to be able to run them down, and bag him, anyway, even if the other gives us the slip. But I'm hoping he'll stick to his pal until we can come up with them."

"We ought to be nearly back to where we picked up the wagon, now, hadn't we, Rob?" asked Merritt, who was straining his eyes trying to make out a white birch tree leaning over the road on the left.

"One more bend and we'll be there," answered Rob, with such absolute confidence that every one of the other scouts knew he had been keeping tabs of the conditions, and could tell to a fraction just when they were drawing near the point that had been marked down in their memories.

A minute later and it turned out that Rob was perfectly correct; because Merritt discovered the landmark for himself.

"There it is, Chief, just ahead of us," he remarked, "where you see that white birch bending over. We made it a point to mark the place, thinking that p'raps you or somebody else would want to know about the men who ran away."

"A clever bit of business, my lad," remarked the other admiringly. And, indeed, what he had seen of these Scouts during the few months he had been in charge of the Hampton police had caused the Chief to entertain a very high opinion of their ability, and make him a firm advocate for the cause they represented.

The horse was pulled up close to where the white slender birch could be seen through the gathering gloom.

"Wait till I strike a match, and I'll try to find a piece of lightwood to make a torch," said Rob, jumping from the wagon.

"No use bothering that way, lad," called out the Chief; "because I've got something along with me that goes away ahead of any wood torch you ever saw."

"Then you must mean an electric hand torch," Tubby ventured to remark. "I know, because I've got one at home."

"Much good that does you," jeered Andy. "A torch, like a gun, is the kind of thing that when you do want it you want it badly."

"Well, how was I to guess all that would happen?" demanded Tubby indignantly. "Don't you think that if I had known we would get that hole in the boat, have a horse and wagon shoved on us this way, and be held up by the Chief and his men, I'd gone and made sure to fetch my little torch along? Sure I would."

"And if I'd known all that," chuckled Andy, always ready to have the last word, "d'ye know what I would have done the first thing? Why, told Rob about that old plug in the bottom of his boat, and seen to it that it was driven in so hard it never could work loose. And that would have saved us from all the rest of the business!"

"All right," rejoined Tubby, with a never-say-die accent to his voice; "all I can remark is that we would have lost a heap of entertaining experiences, that's what!"

They had all left the wagon before this, and Merritt managed to secure the horse to a tree near by; so that in case they found the animal there on their return, after striving to locate the two escaped jail birds, they might have a pleasant means of transportation to Hampton town.

When the police officer had produced his little electric hand torch, which was capable of being carried in a vest pocket and yet gave quite a fine glow when the current was switched on, he told Rob that he had better take possession of the light, as he would really be the one to need it. As for himself and his men, they meant to keep themselves in constant readiness for grappling with the two desperate rogues, should they have the good fortune to come up with them.

Nothing could have pleased Rob more than this splendid chance to show what the education of a scout along the line of woodcraft was doing for the boys of the Eagle Patrol. Here was an opportunity to make a test of their knowledge. If they proved equal to the task of finding those two men who were doing all in their power to elude recapture, it would certainly go far to witness that these scouts had not studied the art of trailing in vain.

And hence it was with considerable satisfaction, as well as a firm determination to exhaust every means he had in his power in order to come up with the fugitives, that the young leader of the Eagles accepted that handy electric torch, and immediately commenced to flash its white glow over the ground in the vicinity of the white birch.

Men and boys trailed along after Rob; Tubby, Merritt and Andy making sure to keep well in the rear, so that they might not interfere with the plans of the Chief.

CHAPTER V. ON THE TRAIL

In this manner they left the dusty road behind them, and entered among the bushes and growth of scrubby trees that bordered it.

The three Eagles who came just after the stalwart police officers kept in a bunch; not that any of them felt afraid in the least; but as they were unarmed, save for the various clubs they had managed to pick up on the way, they seemed to think there might be safety in numbers.

Besides, if at any time they felt in a communicative mood, it was possible to put their heads together and pass whispers along.

Rob, in the lead, was bending over and bringing that little hand torch into play in great style. Nothing could have been finer for the purpose, he quickly concluded, and made up his mind on the spot that he would own such a handy article at the very first opportunity.

The steady white glow allowed him to see the ground so plainly that he could readily distinguish every little mark made by the feet of the fleeing men. On the whole, Rob would have called that job something of a snap; for neither of the fugitives seemed to have once thought of such a thing as "blinding their trail"; such as clever scouts generally do when playing "fox and geese," or some game of that sort.

In fact, the taller fellow, the one who limped so badly, had actually dragged his injured leg after him; and in this way he managed to leave a broad track that Rob believed even a tender-foot might follow with ease.

Still there were places where the ground was hard, being made for the most part of rock; and here the tracker was compelled to be more careful in order that he might not be thrown off the trail by accident and have all sorts of trouble finding it again.

"Say, keep your eye on Rob, fellers," Tubby whispered, when he was so wound up that he just could not keep quiet any longer. "Isn't he showing the Chief a few wrinkles about following a set of tracks, though?"

"Not so loud, Tubby," cautioned Merritt, who, as the second in command of the Eagle Patrol, had a certain amount of authority invested in him that the rest of the scouts always recognized, particularly when Rob was not on duty or absent.

"But he is trailing along like a regular old fox, isn't he?" persisted Tubby, who was hard to repress when he felt the spirit move within him.

"Course he is," muttered Andy; "and this isn't the first time Rob has made grown men sit up and take notice. But there, he's hit a snarl of some kind!"

"Well, you take my word for it, Rob will unravel it in double-quick order!" the stout boy assured him.

"Silence!" hissed Merritt; and this time he apparently "squelched" Tubby, for the latter had nothing more to say just then; but as he had freed his mind, that was a matter of small consequence.

Rob was skirmishing around as though he might have lost the trail owing to the hardness of the ground. He had held up a hand in order to warn the three officers not to stumble over him, and then with his torch held low, proceeded to examine his surroundings.

They saw him rise up and flash his light to the right, then to the left, and finally straight ahead. Apparently he was making up his mind from the conformation of things which way the two fleeing men might have chosen as they pushed forward in the semi-darkness. In other words, Rob was applying an old principle, trying to "put himself in their place" so that he could decide what their natural action under the circumstances would have been.

He seemed to settle quickly which way had looked the most promising to the anxious eyes of two sorely pressed fellows, one of whom could hardly drag himself along, for he immediately turned toward the left, and again flashed his torch on the ground.

Almost immediately afterward the three scouts in the rear caught a queer little sound, not unlike the faint squawk of an eaglet in its nest at feeding time.

"There, did you hear that, fellers?" demanded Tubby excitedly, though he did manage to keep his voice whittled down to a hoarse whisper.

"It was Rob giving us the sign of the Eagles that told he had found what he was looking for; sure it was!" observed Andy.

"That's all right, but you boys let up on your talking. Understand?" was the warning given by the corporal.

Apparently the boy in the lead must have given the three officers some sort of signal with his disengaged hand, for as he moved off they started after him, doubtless with renewed confidence in his ability to lead them. If either of those men who accompanied the Chief on this mission had been inclined to scoff at the usefulness of the education of a Boy Scout, he must have had an object lesson then and there that he would not soon forget.

Later on every one of them candidly admitted that without the aid of Rob they would never have been able to follow the trail of the fleeing rascals for five rods, not having been taught how to read signs, as are all scouts who deserve the name.

After that Rob did not seem to run up against any more snags, for he kept moving steadily along, now turning to one side, and then to the other, just as the parties he tracked had chanced to move in order to avoid some fallen tree, a stump, or a thick clump of thorny bushes that barred their path.

It was splendid work, and the trio of boys who kept tabs on what their patrol leader was doing, felt a genuine thrill of admiration for Rob's skill. Once again were the Eagles proving their worth in an emergency; and after this Hampton folks would have still more reason to feel proud of the patrol and the troop.

"Listen!" said Andy suddenly, "what is that I hear?"

His two companions halted for a brief period of time, because apparently they had not as yet chanced to catch the sound that disturbed Andy.

"Seems like running water to me," ventured Tubby, as if in more or less doubt.

"It is running water," affirmed Merritt quickly; "a little stream of some kind, I guess. Seems to me I remember one that trails through this patch of scrub oak timber."

"Well, we're heading straight for it," remarked Andy; "and like as not the two men wanted to get a drink right bad. They ran so hard they felt dry enough to drain a spring-hole at one turn."

"Sh! You see Rob's heading that way; let's move on!" Merritt told them.

It turned out just as they figured. The run-aways had indeed gone straight for the little streamlet that gurgled through the underbrush; and Rob showed by means of his light just where they had both knelt down alongside the creek to drink.

Just as the other three scouts came up, they heard Rob give a little exclamation that seemed to have in it something like pity.

"What have you found now, son?" asked the big Chief, understanding from the manner in which the clever scout had given this cry that he must have made a new discovery.

"I reckon that poor wretch got a worse broken leg than any one has thought up to now, Chief," Rob remarked with a long breath, as he riveted the light of his little torch upon one certain spot of ground.

"How d'y'e make that out, Rob?" asked Tubby before any one else could speak; for slow in his movements though the fat youth might often seem no one was more ready to interject a word than Tubby.

"Here is where both of them knelt down so they could bend forward and drink," replied the obliging patrol leader, always ready to post his comrades on these little points that would add to their scout education.

"Yep, we can see the marks easy," Andy assured the other.

"Here is where the shorter one got down, because you can see the distance between the marks of his knees and the toes of his shoes doesn't measure nearly as much as this other does. And looking closer you'll see that the tall man wasn't able to double up his left leg as he wanted to."

"That was the one they said he had hurt," remarked the Chief, undoubtedly deeply interested in all that the boy was saying.

"Now, if you look here at the place where his left foot dug into the soil when he lay down to drink, you'll find a stain that tells a story of its own!" Rob went on to say, as he held the torch still lower, so that all could see.

"Jiminy crickets!" exclaimed Tubby, in an awed tone. "Why, it's a blood mark, fellers; sure it is!"

"Yes," added the Chief, "that's right, son. He hurt his leg worse than anybody could have known about. That Con has got plenty of nerve to keep going all this time with such a bad wound! He certainly wanted to escape a term at the pen, all right."

"I think he couldn't drag himself much further, Chief; and we'll be apt to run across him soon, even if the other man gets away," Rob observed; and so much confidence had the big officer learned to put in what the patrol leader of the Eagles said, that he nodded his head and simply remarked:

"That's good news, Rob; let's get a move on again, and close in on our birds!"

"Are they armed, do you know, Chief?" asked Merritt; for he had been wondering what sort of reception they would receive when they finally closed in on the fugitives, who were reckoned desperate men.

"Not so far as is known," replied the other. "I was particular to ask that, for I knew I'd have to shape my plans accordingly. It seems that they raided an old scare-crow that had been left in a field, and managed to change clothes with the dummy after a fashion, for they wanted to pose as tramps, you see. But armed or not, we are ready to settle accounts with the rascals. We're close at your heels, Rob; make all the time you want."

Rob was not having any difficulty whatever in following the trail after the two fugitives had left the little streamlet. He seemed to be as keen on the scent as a rabbit hound, only he went about his work noiselessly, and not with the idea of giving tongue, such as a beagle usually shows.

"We're getting on a warm track, Chief," the boy with the torch suddenly remarked, "because just then I saw a little twig right itself under my very eyes, showing it must have been stepped on only a few minutes before. Hello! here's only one set of tracks! The man with the broken leg has drawn out!"

"But where could he have gone?" asked Tubby. "He didn't have wings, did he? And no aeroplane could dodge down in all this brush to carry him off. If he isn't on the ground, where d'ye reckon he can be, Rob?"

For answer the patrol leader gave one good look at the place where the trail of the man who dragged his left leg after him seemed to stop.

Then he quickly focused the white glow of his electric torch up into the tree directly over-head.

"Oh! looky there, would you, in the fork of the tree!" exclaimed Tubby, always bent on expressing his opinion.

And as the others cast their eyes upward, they saw the huddled figure of a man where Tubby had indicated. Rob had undoubtedly run one of the fugitives down; and hearing them coming through the brush, he must have climbed the tree as a last resort, evidently hoping they might pass him by.

But he had not taken into consideration the fact that a scout was leading the pursuing party, and that the sudden ending of his tracks was bound to cause the trailer to survey the vicinity in the expectation of locating his game.

CHAPTER VI.

THE EAGLES LEAD THE WAY TO SUCCESS

"Don't shoot, gents! I reckon I'm pretty near all in!" called out the man who was in the crotch of the oak tree.

At the same time he elevated both hands as a sign that he was unarmed and did not intend to offer any hostile demonstration. Undoubtedly the sight of the three big officers in blue, not to speak of four stalwart lads dressed in scout uniforms, must have convinced him that he had really run to the end of his rope; and that after being checked so positively in his break for liberty, the next best thing for him to do would be to give in and have his wounded leg attended to.

"Hello! got you, have we, Con?" remarked the Chief pleasantly.

"Looks like it, Chief," grunted the man, who must have been in considerable pain, Rob determined, as he saw the drawn look on his face. "Just gimme half a chance, and I'll drop down out of this. It ain't the easiest thing agoin' for a man with a leg swollen up like mine to move, once he sets still five minutes."

"That's so, Con," the head of the Hampton police force said, as he stepped forward; "and I'll help you down all I can."

If Rob had had a good opinion of the burly Chief before, that added to it; because his consideration for a suffering wretch, even if he were a hard character, proved that the policeman had a heart.

The fugitive was helped to the ground, and he sank down with a half stifled groan. They could see that his face had a peaked look, and that he was compelled to grit his teeth savagely together, as though trying his best not to show signs of weakness. Yes, Con was a man of more than ordinary nerve and grit, Rob knew, as he noticed all this; but then he had made up his mind on that score before now, so he was not at all surprised.

"Corporal Merritt," he said, turning to his second in command; "suppose you take a look at this poor fellow's leg, and see if you can't do something in an emergency to ease the pain. Like as not we'll have to make a stretcher and carry him to where the wagon was left."

"All right, Rob!" was the ready answer Merritt gave; while his eyes fairly sparkled with satisfaction at having the patrol leader show such confidence in him as to turn over this duty to his charge. As a rule Rob generally took it upon himself to play the part of doctor when an occasion arose that required such work.

And imagine the astonishment of those three policemen as they saw the corporal immediately set to work to tackle his job with the assurance of an experienced physician or surgeon. As for the injured man, he stared as though hardly knowing what to believe, to see a mere boy undertake a task like that.

Tubby gave one look as Merritt unwound the rough bandage that the wounded man had wrapped tightly around his injured leg, and gasped as he turned his head away. Andy kept on staring as though fascinated; but at the same time had any one observed the boy closely he would have found that Andy's usual healthy color had given place to a ghastly hue.

If Merritt experienced anything of the same feeling as he proceeded to manipulate the limb of the man, he certainly did not let the weakness interfere with his work.

"I may hurt you some, but stand it as well as you can," he told the other. "Because I have an idea the leg may not be broken after all, but only badly wrenched and torn by striking some hard object. Steady, now!"

A minute later, as boys and officers stared, and mentally gave Merritt credit for knowing all about "first aid to the injured," the corporal went on to say:

"It is just as I thought, for there is no fracture of the bones that I can find. But you have neglected it so long and strained it so by walking and running that I'm afraid you're going to have a bad time with that leg. But I'll put something on that will ease the pain, more or less, and bind it up fresh for you. Then we'll get you to the wagon somehow, without your having to walk."

"Say, are you what they call the Boy Scouts?" asked the injured man, who had been listening to all Merritt said, as well as watching his deft fingers work, with amazement written large upon his peaked face.

"Just what we are," Tubby hastened to inform him; "and you can see now what the scouts learn. You are not the first man who has been handled by the members of the Eagle Patrol, Mister."

"Well, I wanted to know!" muttered the man, still staring, as though he could not understand how mere boys could master the art of handling a bad wound like that with such skill, and show the nerve to do it at the same time.

"Where's Rob going?" asked Tubby just then.

While Merritt was working Rob had held the torch so that he could see, until Andy had taken a hint, and scraped enough dead leaves together to make a little fire, and in this way given all the light that was needed.

Apparently the patrol leader was not satisfied with having overtaken one of the desperate fugitives who had escaped from the Riverhead jail. He must have figured, while standing there, waiting until the fire had attained sufficient size to allow his moving off, that possibly the other rascal might not have run much further, as they would surely have caught the sound of his pressing through all that dense undergrowth; for at the time Con was helped up into his tree by the shorter man, the pursuers could not have been far away.

And so the scout who carried that useful electric hand torch proceeded to find the tracks of the second man; after which he began to follow the trail.

It immediately led him into the thickest of the underbrush; and this fact only added strength to the boy's former deduction, to the effect that no one could push on through all this matted growth without making all sorts of sounds capable of being readily heard by keen ears a quarter of a mile away almost.

Merritt had now finished bandaging the wounded leg of the man, and the fellow frankly told him it was feeling many times better already.

"You're a sure enough wonder, boy, that's what!" the man went on to say; and while he did not thank the amateur surgeon in so many words, Merritt could easily trace gratitude in the tone of his voice. However, the young corporal was not doing this in order to receive praise, but because it lay in the line of his duty as a scout.

"Got one man, anyway, Chief, didn't you?" Andy remarked.

"Half a loaf, they say, is some better than no bread," answered the big man, chuckling, as though vastly amused over the result of this singular hunt in company with the Boy Scouts.

Before he could say anything more, there arose a series of loud "k-r-e-e-es" from the direction where the patrol leader had gone a minute or two before.

"That's Rob!" cried Tubby, all in a tremor at the thought of new developments coming on the carpet.

"And he wants us to come along!" added Andy. "Listen! There's somebody else calling out, too, and it's a gruff voice, boys. I wonder, now, if Rob's cornered the other runaway in a tree, too. Let's hurry on and see!"

They were soon all in motion, leaving the wounded man alone by the little fire, since in all probability he would never dream of attempting further flight. And Merritt did not feel like being cheated out of his share of the fun in order to stand by and watch one who was really the prisoner of the Chief.

They had little difficulty in knowing which way to move, for the racket still kept up ahead. It was found to be pretty hard work pushing through all that dense mass of ground vines, bushes, and closely growing dwarf oaks, whose branches caught Tubby several times and almost choked him.

Once he did actually find himself gripped by the throat by one of these lower limbs, and lifted off his feet for the space of three seconds; so that ever afterward Tubby was fond of saying that he knew from actual experience just how Absalom must have felt when he was caught by his long hair and left hanging in a tree.

"Rob, oh, Rob, where are you?" called Andy, as they drew nearer to the strange sounds, which, besides spoken words, seemed to consist of the swishing of hurtling stones or clubs, and jeering laughter, all so queer that the scouts could make little or nothing of them.

For answer there was a flash, as Rob turned his torch toward them for just the space of a second; and at the same time he was heard calling close at hand:

"Here I am, just ahead of you, boys! Better look out or you'll get hit!"

"But what in the wide world is going on, Rob?" demanded Merritt, as he heard some object strike with a heavy thud among the bushes not two feet away from him.

"I'll show you what it means!" laughed Rob, who it turned out was hiding back of a fairly large tree-trunk not five feet away. As he spoke he sent the white light of his torch straight ahead once more.

What they saw astonished them. A moving figure caught their attention, and no explanation was needed to tell the boys that this must be the shorter one of the precious pair of rogues who had broken jail, and given the authorities of Suffolk and adjoining counties such a scare.

He seemed to be groping all around him, as though trying to find more stones or fragments of broken limbs with which to bombard the patrol leader, whose presence was betrayed by the flash of his torch.

"What's he doing there; and why does he lean over like that?" called out Tubby, at the same time dodging behind a convenient tree, when he saw the man proceed to hurl a stone in their direction, following it up with a stream of hard words that told how furious he felt.

"Why, the fact is," said Rob, still laughing, as though he considered it a good joke on the fugitive, "that he got himself in the neatest trap you ever saw. In the dark and his hurry he pushed his foot into some sort of frog made of the roots of a bush, and after that got so twisted up in the vines that if he was promised a thousand dollars for doing it, he just couldn't break away. I flashed the light on him, you see, where he was lying low, hoping we'd clear out and let him get away; and he was so mad he began to fire everything he could lay hands on at me. There's your second man, Chief. I'll hand over the job of taking him to you."

"Well, I wouldn't be afraid to wager you could do it as clever as the next one if it was up to you, son!" remarked the big officer, as he started toward the spot where the baffled fugitive crouched, looking about as furious and ugly as any one could who had been tripped up in this neat manner by ill fortune.

Of course the fellow saw that the game was up. He did not dare to offer any resistance when the Chief walked up to him and ordered him to hold out his hands. And when there came a sharp "click" that made Tubby wince, they knew that the fugitive from justice had been retaken, and that he stood a fair chance to face a judge and jury before many days.

It required considerable labor to get him free from the trap that Nature had so cruelly sprung upon him, but in the end this was accomplished; and upon returning to where the little fire still burned, they found the wounded man lying there on the ground, as comfortably as he could, and awaiting them with an expectant look on his face.

CHAPTER VII.

TUBBY REFUSES TO FORGET

"Too bad they got you, too, Joe!" said the wounded man; and yet there was something like satisfaction on his face, along with the grin he gave; because misery likes company, and if his companion had managed to escape it would have seemed doubly hard for him to be retaken, and badly hurt at that.

"This man isn't able to walk all the way back to the road, Chief," Rob went on to say, indicating the tall fellow, who lay there with his leg bound up the best Merritt could do with so little at hand to aid him.

"I reckon, son," returned the big officer, so pleased with the success that had come to him that he was ready to grant almost any favor these scouts asked, "we'll just have to carry him, then."

"And that would hurt him almost as much as limping along," Rob continued; "so if you hold up for a little bit, we'll try and fix a stretcher that ought to answer; though it's going to be a mighty poor sort of thing, without even a camp hatchet to cut poles with. Get busy with me, boys, and show the Chief what you know."

Now this was one of the things in which all the Eagles had been thoroughly drilled. They knew how to go to work to make a comfortable stretcher on which an injured person might be carried for miles. But just as the patrol leader said, not having a hatchet handy was likely to prove something of a handicap. However, scouts always try to do the best they can, no matter what difficulties they run up against, and Merritt was the first to start scurrying around, looking for stout poles that would serve for the sides and handles of the stretcher.

Once more did those three police officers stand and watch what the boys were doing with both wonder and interest written on their faces. Why, they had never dreamed that half-grown lads could be so resourceful; and even after a number of fairly straight poles had been collected, calculated to bear easily the weight of the injured man, none of the men could guess just how these were to be utilized, or fastened together.

Judge of their astonishment, then, when they saw the boys make another little side hunt and come back with strands of pliable vines that could be twisted about the poles, fastening them together, each live vine stronger three times over than a cord of the same size would have been.

Each scout took pride in being able to render his share of the work; and Rob, on his part, was filled with satisfaction to find how well things began to shape themselves under the nimble fingers of his chums and himself.

As the rude but effective stretcher began to assume its desired form, the Chief gave each of his men a nod and a wink, as though calling their attention to the clever way in which these ready lads met an emergency by "being prepared"; letting them understand, also, that a useful lesson might be drawn from the happening.

Even the two captured rogues manifested considerable interest in what was going on, the wounded fellow because he had good reason to be thankful for receiving so much consideration, and the shorter rascal because he had never been given a chance to see scouts work before.

"There's your stretcher, Chief," said Rob, when less than ten minutes had slipped by, "and it's going to answer all right, I think."

"No question about that, lad," replied the big officer; "and made so strong into the bargain that it would bear even my weight without trouble. And now let's get Con on it so we can start for the wagon."

This was quickly done. The man winced when they moved him, but other than that managed to repress all signs of his suffering. The two men accompanying the Chief took hold of the handles that

had been provided, and had not the slightest trouble in walking away with the wounded rogue on the stretcher. As for the Chief, he took the other prisoner in charge. Rob walked in the van, accompanied by his chums, and tried to pick out the easiest way, always thinking of the pain that the wretched Con must be enduring every time one of the bearers stumbled over a root.

"This is what I call great work," Tubby said, as he managed to keep alongside the one who bore the torch, so that he could get the full benefit of its light; for he did not fancy going down on all fours every little while when some vine happened to be in the path.

"And I'll surely never forget this scene," Andy remarked, showing that it had made a great impression on him. "Lots of times I'll shut my eyes, and see us all stringing along this way with that fellow laid out on the stretcher. And say, when you look around and see how these old vines hang down, you'd almost believe we were making our way through some tropical forest like lots of men we've read about."

"Well," spoke up Tubby briskly, "mebbe, now, we may be doing that same thing before a great while, if only Uncle Mark makes up his mind to send me down there to Mexico to straighten out his mixed affairs. I almost believe he would right now, if only Rob, here, was going to be along, because he's heard so much about him. And it wouldn't cost us a red cent, either, because Uncle Mark'll stand for it. But the trouble is we're bound to school right now, and can't get away, hang the luck!"

"Careful there, Tubby," warned Merritt just then; "you're getting too excited, and you don't watch your steps as you ought. That time you nearly knocked me down banging against me so suddenly."

"But aren't we nearly to the road, Rob?" pleaded Tubby, who was breathing hard, partly on account of his exertions in keeping close to the leader, and also because he persisted in wasting so much wind in talking.

"More than half way, Tubby, so cheer up; the worst is yet to come," chuckled the patrol leader. And then as the fat scout gave a dismal groan Rob hastened to add: "That was only said for fun, because we are going to have it easier right along after this. I think in five minutes we shall come out on the road."

When about that time had expired, Rob flashed the light of his torch ahead, and then called out:

"There's the white birch that hangs over the road, boys; and the wagon is not far away from that, you remember."

"What d'ye think of that, Chief? If he didn't go and fetch us straight back to the place we started from!" Andy called out.

"That was easy," Rob told him; "because I only had to follow our own trail, you understand. And here we are!"

The horse whinnied at their approach, just as though he might have known they were friends; and possibly the poor tired beast was as hungry for a good feed of oats as animals of his class can get.

The rude stretcher, having served its purpose, was cast aside, and the wounded man made as comfortable as possible in the bed of the wagon. All of the scouts but Merritt settled themselves as best they could, as did also two of the officers. The Chief and his prisoner occupied the seat with the driver, where the recaptured rogue could be constantly watched.

In this way, then, they set out to cover the two miles or more that lay between them and Hampton. Naturally the scouts felt quite jolly over the remarkable success that had accompanied their labors of the evening.

"Well, who would have thought when the water came a-rushing into our boat, so we had to run her ashore and leave her there till morning, that we'd come on the finest chance ever to show what we knew about scoutcraft?" Andy burst out after they had been rumbling along the road steadily for a short time. Merritt had been cautioned not to try and make speed on account of the poor fellow who had hard work to repress a groan with every jolt.

"That's the way things come around, sometimes," Rob told him. "You never can tell how they're going to turn out. Lots of times I've heard my father say that the very things he looked on as disasters proved to be blessings in disguise. And for one, I could almost forgive the fellow who played that miserable trick on us, because of the great time we've had since landing."

"Well, I don't join with you there," grumbled Tubby, who did not often hold a grudge against anybody, and therefore made his present action the more singular. "What if that plug had dropped out when we were out in the middle of the bay, with the wind and waves like they were? Wouldn't we have been in danger of our lives? I can see a feller of my size swimming a mile and more! Huh! that was a coward's trick, let me tell you. And just wait and see if I don't fasten the guilt on the wretch that played it on us. I've got all the evidence needed right here in my pocket; and given a little time, I'll fix him, – but I'm not mentioning any names *yet!*"

Both Andy and Rob pretended to consider Tubby's intention to play detective in the nature of a great joke, because they did not believe that the fat scout had any particular gift along such lines; but he certainly seemed in deadly earnest, and took himself seriously, for a fact.

"We are likely to be late to supper to-night, boys!" Rob remarked, as they saw the lights of Hampton ahead, and knew that presently they would be in the home town.

"What of that, when we've got such a splendid excuse?" Tubby said, as he puffed himself up with pride. "I know my maw and Uncle Mark'll listen a-holding their breath while I tell of all the wonderful adventures that came our way since we started after Rob's select oysters! Um! don't I wish I had a few to sample right this minute! But then, I ought to be home pretty quick now, and I guess I can hold in. Friday night we always have Boston baked beans at our house; and you know I'm particularly fond of those. And this is Friday, isn't it?"

He heaved a contented sigh, as though making up his mind that supper would taste all the finer for being held back so long; and that was Tubby's way all over.

"I'll jump out here, Chief," said Rob, as Merritt held up the horse, knowing they were close to the banker's house. "I reckon I can tote that sack of oysters such a short way. So-long, fellows; see you first thing in the morning, Merritt. I'd like mighty much to get my boat home before that old hurricane from the West Indies comes tearing up the coast. Good night, Chief, and I'm glad we were able to lend you a hand. I hope you get a doctor busy with that swollen leg Con's carrying around with him. It'd be rough if blood poisoning set in."

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